

Comment

Transparency: the new democracy

By Grover Norquist

Published: August 8 2007 18:56 | Last updated: August 8 2007 18:56

The nice venture capitalists in Silicon Valley are always looking for “the next big thing”. While we will have to wait for another six months to learn who will make it through the Republican and Democrat “Survivor” reality show we call primaries we can already see the next big thing in politics bubbling up from the 50 states: transparency. Making state budgets, contracts and individual expenditures available to the public on the internet.

[Ask the expert](#)



Is accountable transparency the new democracy? Can the US show the world the way? Grover Norquist answers your questions in an online Q&A. [Post a question now.](#)

Rick Perry, the Republican governor of Texas, helped advance this cause of transparency last autumn by putting his own governor's office expenses on the web in a searchable form. Susan Combs, the state's elected comptroller, followed suit when she took office in January.

Five states passed laws this spring mandating various levels of transparency, such as posting all contracts and grants and even all state expenditures on the web: Kansas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Hawaii and Texas. Legislation was introduced or debated in a dozen others and is set to pass next spring.

The state of Texas has further required that any school district that cannot prove that it is spending at least 65 per cent of its education budget in the classroom must publish its check register – every single expenditure – online for citizens to inspect.

Republican Mitch Daniels, Indiana's governor, put his state's contracts on the [internet](#) on the very day he took office in January 2005.

Governor Matt Blunt of Missouri, a Republican, has gone the furthest the fastest. Through executive order, Mr Blunt has put up the Missouri Accountability Portal (“[Map Your Taxes](#)”) website, which posts a wide range of government expenditures.

You can look up the actual expense records of your favourite politician and bureaucrat. A linked [website](#) provides access to the actual contracts let by the state. There are other plans, including the posting of state employee salaries.

Mr Blunt explained: “One of my goals has been to transform state government by using technology to improve efficiency and enhance transparency. The old-way bureaucrats like the paper-based system, which empowers them and is less accountable to taxpayers. Few Missourians can take the time to root through mounds of paperwork in some department to find out where their taxes are going. Missourians deserve openness in state spending. These dollars belong to the people of our state.”

Popular response? The Map Your Taxes website has received more than 600,000 hits in its first few weeks.

Opponents of transparency tried in other states to assume large costs to posting financial data on the web. Some proffered estimates ran into the millions.

Mr Blunt demolished this delaying tactic for other states when he put the entire state finances online without a single additional appropriation – just using existing staff and resources.

Transparency is advancing rapidly for several reasons.

First, it is moving fastest at the state level and is not stymied by partisan wrangling in Washington, where everything is about gaining a footing in the 2008 presidential campaign.

Second, transparency has a visible supporter in the media. Putting state government or school board expenditures on the web might be called the “lazy-journalist-wins-a-Pulitzer” legislation. Newsmen and women like openness. No more waiting around for pre-digested bits of news coming through press releases. Now everything the state or local government does is visible 24/7.

Third, most of this information in most states is already legally public information. It just sits in boxes in the basement of city hall or state government buildings. Putting it on the web does not require changing any laws or asking permission.

Fourth, the effort is oddly trans-ideological. This writer, a taxpayer advocate, and Ralph Nader, a somewhat left-of-centre consumer advocate, jointly sent a letter to all governors of both parties urging them to make their books transparent. Both teams assume the other guys are up to no good. And they are probably both right.

And what about Washington? The Bush administration was urged to put its contracts and grants and books online years ago.

Mr Daniels, then at the Office of Management and Budget, supported the effort, but the White House could not be bothered. So Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, a conservative, and Senator Barack Obama of Illinois, a certifiable liberal, joined together to require that at least an outline of grants and contracts be made available online. The legislation passed last September and will be fully implemented by January 2008. Although it is a step in the right direction, this legislation is very weak beer compared with what has been or is being implemented at the state level.

Washington will fall last. The Democrats now running Congress have been moving backwards by making their 38,000 secret earmarks – pet projects of individual members of Congress – less transparent, and the keeper of the executive branch’s privileges against the public’s right to know is Dick Cheney, vice-president. His penchant for secrecy makes Howard Hughes look like Gypsy Rose Lee.

There is a history of reform coming to Washington through the states: the property tax revolt in the 1970s, term limits for politicians in the 1990s, and now transparency. The argument that something “cannot be done” or “costs too much” collapses when a dozen states have shown the way.

The writer is president of Americans for Tax Reform. A detailed memo on the transparency movement can be found at www.atr.org

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2007

Is the US pioneering transparency?

Published: August 8 2007 19:11 | Last updated: August 8 2007 19:11

Grover Norquist, president of anti-tax lobbying group Americans for Tax Reform, argues in the FT that the next big thing in US politics is transparency: making state budgets, contracts and individual expenditures available to the public on the internet.

“Transparency is advancing rapidly in America”, he writes. “Five states have passed laws recently mandating various levels of transparency, such as posting all contracts and grants and even all state expenditures on the web.”

Mr Norquist believes that Washington will fall last. “The Democrats now running Congress have been moving backwards by making their 38,000 secret earmarks – pet projects of individual members of Congress – less transparent”.

But Mr Norquist claims that there is a history of reform coming to Washington through the states. “The argument that something “cannot be done” or “costs too much” collapses when a dozen states have shown the way”, he writes.

Is accountable transparency the new democracy? And is the US pioneering transparency? Mr Norquist will answer your questions in a live debate on Tuesday from 2pm BST.

Post a question now to ask@ft.com or use the online submissions form below.

[Grover Norquist: Accountable transparency is the new democracy](#)

A detailed memo on the transparency movement can be [found here](#)

Name(mandatory)*

Location

Email Address(mandatory)*

Question(mandatory)*

The most thought-provoking online contributions may be published in the Financial Times newspaper, so please supply your full name and location.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2007

- [Print article](#)
- [Email article](#)
- [Order reprints](#)